Life-Span Adjustment of Children to Their Parents’ Divorce

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Abstract

Children who experience parental divorce, compared with children in continuously intact two-parent families, exhibit more conduct problems, more symptoms of psychological maladjustment, lower academic achievement, more social difficulties, and poorer self-concepts. Similarly, adults who experienced parental divorce as children, compared with adults raised in continuously intact two-parent families, score lower on a variety of indicators of psychological, interpersonal, and socio-economic well-being.

However, the overall group differences between offspring from divorced and intact families are small, with considerable diversity existing in children’s reactions to divorce. Children’s adjustment to divorce depends on several factors, including the amount and quality of contact with noncustodial parents, the custodial parents’ psychological adjustment and parenting skills, the level of interparental conflict that precedes and follows divorce, the degree of economic hardship to which children are exposed, and the number of stressful life events that accompany and follow divorce. These factors can be used as guides to assess the probable impact of various legal and therapeutic interventions to improve the well-being of children of divorce.

Children have always faced the threat of family disruption. In the past, death was more likely to disrupt families than was divorce. Around the turn of the century in the United States, about 25% of children experienced the death of a parent before age 15, compared with 7% or 8% who experienced parental divorce. 1 As a result of the increase in longevity, the proportion of dependent children who lost a parent through death decreased during this century; currently, only about 5% of children are so affected. But the divorce rate increased over this same period, and at current rates, between two-fifths and two-thirds of all recent first marriages will end in divorce or separation. 2 The high rate of marital dissolution means that about 40% of children will experience a parental divorce prior to the age of 16. 3 Although a substantial risk of family disruption has always been present, today it is much more likely to be caused by divorce than by death.

Americans traditionally have believed that a two-parent family is necessary for the successful socialization and development of children. Consequently, it was assumed that parental death leads to many problems for children, such as
delinquency, depression, and even suicide in later life—assumptions that appeared to be confirmed by early research.4

More recent studies indicate that, although parental death disadvantages children, the long-term consequences are not as severe as people once believed.5 Nevertheless, many social scientists assumed that children who “lost” a parent through divorce experienced serious problems similar to those experienced by children who lost a parent through death. Furthermore, whereas the death of a parent is usually unintended and unavoidable, marital dissolution is freely chosen by at least one parent. Consequently, the question of the impact of divorce on children took on moral overtones. These concerns, combined with the dramatic increase in the rate of divorce during the last few decades, resulted in a proliferation of studies on the effects of divorce on children.

This research literature does not always lead to firm conclusions. Many gaps exist in our knowledge, and weaknesses in study methodology mean that many findings are tentative at best. Nevertheless, a consensus is beginning to emerge among social scientists about the consequences of divorce for children. And, in spite of its limitations, this knowledge can help to inform policies designed to improve the well-being of children involved in parental marital dissolution.

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How Do Researchers Study Children and Divorce?

To understand how divorce affects children, social scientists predominately rely on two research designs: cross-sectional and longitudinal.6 In a cross-sectional study,7 researchers compare children from divorced and continuously intact two-parent families at a single point in time.5 In a longitudinal study, researchers follow children over an extended period of time following marital dissolution.8 Longitudinal studies usually include a comparison group of children from two-parent families as well. Although both types of research designs have methodological advantages and disadvantages, they provide useful information about adjustment.5,8,9 Cross-sectional studies provide a “snapshot” that shows how children of divorce differ from other children, whereas longitudinal studies allow us to understand how children adjust to divorce over time.

In addition to studies of children, social scientists have studied the long-term consequences of divorce by comparing adults who experienced divorce as children with those who grew up in continuously intact families. Researchers also have carried out a small number of longitudinal studies in which children of divorce are followed into early adulthood.10

Three types of samples appear in the literature.11 Clinical samples consist of children or adults who are in therapy or counseling. Clinical samples are useful in documenting the kinds of problems presented by offspring who adjust poorly to divorce, but these results cannot be generalized to the broad majority of people who never receive professional attention. Researchers obtain convenience samples of children or adults through community organizations (such as single-parent support groups) or other local sources. Convenience samples are relatively easy and inexpensive to obtain, but people in these groups may be atypical in unknown ways. Researchers select random samples of children or adults in a scientific manner such that the sample represents a clearly defined population within known limits.12 These samples may be obtained from schools, court records, or households. Random samples allow us to make valid generalizations about the majority of children who experience divorce.13 Unfortunately, these types of samples are also the most difficult and expensive to obtain.

Researchers match (or statistically equate) children or adults in the two samples (divorced and intact) on key variables known to be associated with both divorce and adjustment.14 For example, parents of low socioeconomic status are more likely than other parents to divorce and to have children who exhibit behavioral and academic problems. Consequently, it is necessary to make sure that
Life-Span Adjustment of Children to Their Parents’ Divorce

Researchers then select outcome measures that reflect children’s and adults’ functioning, or well-being. Common outcome measures for children include academic achievement, conduct, psychological adjustment, self-concept, social adjustment, and the quality of relations with parents. Common outcome measures for adults include psychological adjustment, conduct, use of mental health services, self-concept, social well-being, marital quality, separation or divorce, single parenthood, socioeconomic attainment, and physical health.

Social scientists gather information about children by interviewing one or both parents, questioning the child’s teachers, administering tests to the child, or directly observing the child’s behavior. Information is usually obtained from adults by interviewing them. Researchers then compare outcomes for those in the divorced and the continuously intact family groups. Statistical criteria are used to judge if differences in outcome measures are large enough to rule out the possibility of their being attributable to chance alone. Observed differences that are too large to be attributable to chance are assumed to be caused by divorce, or at least, by some factor(s) associated with divorce.

Unfortunately, because these studies are correlational, it is difficult to know for certain if divorce is responsible for observed differences between groups. It is always possible that groups might differ in ways that researchers cannot anticipate, measure, and control. For example, an unspecified parental personality characteristic might increase the risk of both divorce and child maladjustment. Firm conclusions about causation require experimentation; because we cannot randomly assign children to divorced and nondivorced families, our beliefs about the causal impact of divorce remain tentative.

How Do Children of Divorce Differ from Other Children?

Those who delve into the published literature on this topic may experience some frustration, as the results vary a good deal from study to study. Many studies show that children of divorce have more problems than do children in continuously intact two-parent families. But other studies show no difference, and a few show that children in divorced families are better off in certain respects than children in two-parent families. This inconsistency results from the fact that studies vary in their sampling strategies, choice of what outcomes to measure, methods of obtaining information, and techniques for analyzing data.

A technique known as meta-analysis was recently developed to deal with this very situation. In a meta-analysis, the results of individual studies are expressed in terms of an “effect size” which summarizes the differences between children in divorced and intact groups on each outcome. Because these effect sizes are expressed in a common unit of measure, it is possible to combine them across all studies to determine whether significant effects exist for each topic being reviewed. It is also possible to examine how design features of studies, such as the nature of the sample, might affect the conclusions.

In 1991, Amato and Keith pooled the results for 92 studies that involved more than 13,000 children ranging from preschool to college age. This meta-analysis confirmed that children in divorced families, on average, experience more problems and have a lower level of well-being than do children in continuously intact two-parent families. These problems include lower academic achievement, more behavioral problems, poorer psychological adjustment, more negative self-concepts, more social difficulties, and more problematic relationships with both mothers and fathers.

To determine if there are also differences in adjustment when children of divorce grow into adulthood, Amato and Keith carried out a second meta-analysis of 37 studies in which they examined adult children of divorce. These results, based
on pooled data from 80,000 adults, suggest that parental divorce has a detrimental impact on the life course. Compared with those raised in intact two-parent families, adults who experienced a parental divorce had lower psychological well-being, more behavioral problems, less education, lower job status, a lower standard of living, lower marital satisfaction, a heightened risk of divorce, a heightened risk of being a single parent, and poorer physical health.

The view that children adapt readily to divorce and show no lingering negative consequences is clearly inconsistent with the cumulative research in this area. However, several qualifications temper the seriousness of this conclusion. First, the average differences between children from divorced and continuously intact families are small rather than large. This fact suggests that divorce is not as severe a stressor for children as are other things that can go wrong during childhood. For example, a recent meta-analysis of studies dealing with childhood sexual abuse revealed average effect sizes three to four times larger than those based on studies of children of divorce. Second, although children of divorce differ, on average, from children in continuously intact two-parent families, there is a great deal of overlap between the two groups.

To illustrate these points, the results of a hypothetical but typical study are shown in Figure 1. This figure shows the distribution of well-being scores (on a representative measure of well-being) for children in divorced and nondivorced families. The height of the curve represents the frequency with which children score at various levels of well-being. Lower scores on the left side of the figure indicate poorer outcomes, whereas higher scores on the right side of the figure indicate better outcomes.

The average for each group of children is represented by the highest point in each
curve. Note that the average score of children in the divorced group is lower than the average score of children in the non-divorced group, indicating a lower level of well-being. At the same time, a large proportion of children in the divorced group score higher than the average score of children in the nondivorced group. Similarly, a large proportion of children in the nondivorced group score lower than the average score of children in the divorced group. This overlap reflects the diversity of outcomes for children in both groups. Although the figure is described in terms of children, the same conclusions apply to studies dealing with adults from divorced and intact families of origin.

This diversity helps us to understand why the average effects of divorce are relatively weak. Divorce may represent a severe stressor for some children, resulting in substantial impairment and decline in well-being. But for other children, divorce may be relatively inconsequential. And some children may show improvements following divorce. In other words, to inquire about the effects of divorce, as if all children were affected similarly, is to ask the wrong question. A better question would be, “Under what conditions is divorce harmful or beneficial to children?” This point is returned to below.

Variations by Gender of Child

Some researchers are interested in measuring differences in adjustment between children of divorce and children in intact families based on such variables as gender, ethnicity, age, and cohort membership in attempts to identify groups that may respond differently to divorce. To inquire about the effects of divorce, as if all children were affected similarly, is to ask the wrong question. A better question would be, “Under what conditions is divorce harmful or beneficial to children?” This point is returned to below.

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Amato and Keith tried to clarify this issue in their meta-analytic studies by pooling the results from all studies that reported data for males and females separately. For children, the literature reveals one major gender difference: the estimated negative effects of divorce on social adjustment are stronger for boys than for girls. Social adjustment includes measures of popularity, loneliness, and cooperativeness. In other areas, however, such as academic achievement, conduct, or psychological adjustment, no differences between boys and girls are apparent. Why a difference in social adjustment, in particular, should occur is unclear. Girls may be more socially skilled than boys, and this may make them less susceptible to any disruptive effects of divorce. Alternatively, the increased aggressiveness of boys from divorced families may make their social relationships especially problematic, at least in the short term. Nevertheless, the meta-analysis suggests that boys do not always suffer more detrimental consequences of divorce than do girls.

The meta-analysis for adults also revealed minimal sex differences, with one exception: although both men and women from divorced families obtain less education than do those from continuously intact two-parent families, this difference is larger for women than for men. The reason for the greater vulnerability of women is somewhat unclear. One possibility is that noncustodial fathers are less likely to finance the higher education of daughters than sons.
Variations by Ethnicity of Child

There is a scant amount of research on how divorce affects nonwhite children of divorce. For example, because relatively little research has focused on this population, Amato and Keith were unable to reach any conclusions about ethnic differences in children's reactions to divorce.\(^{20}\) The lack of information on how divorce affects nonwhite children is a serious omission in this research literature.

With regard to African-American children, some research has suggested that academic deficits associated with living with a single mother are not as pronounced for black children as for white children.\(^{32}\)

In relation to adults, Amato and Keith show that African Americans are affected less by parental divorce than are whites. For example, the gap in socioeconomic attainment between adults from divorced and nondivorced families of origin is greater among whites than among African Americans. This difference may have to do with the fact that divorce is more common, and perhaps more accepted, among African Americans than among whites.

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Variations by Age of Child

Some of the best descriptions of how divorce affects children of different ages come from the work of Wallerstein and Kelly, who conducted detailed interviews with children and parents.\(^{34}\) Although their sample appears to have overrepresented parents who had a difficult time adjusting to divorce, many of their conclusions about age differences have been supported by later studies. Observation of children during the first year after parental separation showed that preschool age children lack the cognitive sophistication to understand the meaning of divorce. Consequently, they react to the departure of one parent with a great deal of confusion. Because they do not understand what is happening, many become fearful. For example, a child may wonder, “Now that one parent is gone, what is to stop the other parent from leaving also?” Young children also tend to be egocentric, that is, they see themselves at the center of the world. This leads some children to blame themselves for their parents’ divorce. For example, they may think, “Daddy left because I was bad.” Regression to earlier stages of behavior is also common among very young children.

Children of primary school age have greater cognitive maturity and can more accurately grasp the meaning of divorce. However, their understanding of what divorce entails may lead them to grieve for the loss of the family as it was, and feelings of sadness and depression are common. Some children see the divorce as a personal rejection. However, because egocentrism decreases with age, many are able to place the blame elsewhere—usually on a parent. Consequently, older children in this age group may feel a great deal of anger toward one, or sometimes both, parents.

Adolescents are more peer-oriented and less dependent on the family than are younger children. For this reason, they may be impacted less directly by the divorce. However, adolescents may still feel a considerable degree of anger toward one or both parents. In addition, adolescents are concerned about their own intimate relationships. The divorce of their parents may lead adolescents to question their own ability to maintain a long-term relationship with a partner.
The work of Wallerstein and Kelly suggests that children at every age are affected by divorce, although the nature of their reactions differs. But are these reactions more disturbing for one group than for another? Wallerstein and Kelly found that preschool children were the most distressed in the period following parental separation. However, 10 years later, the children of preschool age appeared to have adjusted better than children who were older at the time of family disruption.35

Many other studies have examined age at the time of divorce to see if it is associated with children’s problems. However, these studies have yielded mixed and often inconsistent results, and the meta-analyses of children20 and adults23 were unable to cast much light on these issues.36

A common problem in many data sets is that age at divorce and time since divorce are confounded. In other words, for a group of children of the same age, the younger they were at the time of divorce, the more time that has elapsed. But if we examine children whose parents all divorced at about the same time, then the more time that has passed, the older children are at the time of the study. Similarly, if we hold constant the age of the child at the time of divorce, then length of time and current age are perfectly correlated. In other words, it is impossible to separate the effects of age at divorce, length of time since divorce, and current age. Given this problem, it is not surprising that research findings are unclear. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that divorce has the potential to impact negatively on children of all ages.

**Year of Study**

One additional noteworthy finding that emerged from the meta-analyses by Amato and Keith20,23 concerns the year in which the study was conducted. These researchers found that older studies tended to yield larger differences between children from divorced and intact families than studies carried out more recently. This tendency was observed in studies of children (in relation to measures of academic achievement and conduct) and in studies of adults (in relation to measures of psychological adjustment, separation and divorce, material quality of life, and occupational quality).23,37

The difference persisted when the fact that more recent studies are more methodologically sophisticated than earlier studies was taken into account. This finding suggests that more recent cohorts of children are showing less severe effects of divorce than earlier cohorts. Two explanations are worth considering. First, as divorce has become more common, attitudes toward divorce have become more accepting, so children probably feel less stigmatized. Similarly, the increasing number of divorces makes it easier for children to obtain support from others in similar circumstances. Second, because the legal and social barriers to marital dissolution were stronger in the past, couples who obtained a divorce several decades ago probably had more serious problems and experienced more conflict prior to separation than do some divorcing couples today. Furthermore, divorces were probably more acrimonious before the introduction of no-fault divorce. Thus, children of divorce in the past may have been exposed to more dysfunctional family environments and higher levels of conflict than were more recent cohorts of children.

**Why Does Divorce Lower Children’s Well-Being?**

Available research clearly shows an association between parental divorce and children’s well-being. However, the causal
mechanisms responsible for this association are just beginning to be understood. Most explanations refer to the absence of the noncustodial parent, the adjustment of the custodial parent, interparental conflict, economic hardship, and life stress. Variations in these factors may explain why divorce affects some children more adversely than others.

**Parental Absence**

According to this view, divorce affects children negatively to the extent that it results in a loss of time, assistance, and affection provided by the noncustodial parent. Mothers and fathers are both considered potentially important resources for children. Both can serve as sources of practical assistance, emotional support, protection, guidance, and supervision. Divorce usually brings about the departure of one parent—typically the father—from the child’s household. Over time, the quantity and quality of contact between children and noncustodial parents often decreases, and this is believed to result in lower levels of adjustment for these children as compared with children from intact families.  

The parental absence explanation is supported by several lines of research. For example, some studies show that children who experience the death of a parent exhibit problems similar to those of children who “lose” a parent through divorce. These findings are consistent with the notion that the absence of a parent for any reason is problematic for children. Also consistent with a parental absence perspective are studies showing that children who have another adult (such as a grandparent or other relative) to fill some of the functions of the absent parent have fewer problems than do children who have no substitute for the absent parent. In addition, although the results of studies in the area of access to the noncustodial parent and adjustment are mixed, in general, studies show that a close relationship with both parents is associated with positive adjustment after divorce. One circumstance in which high levels of access may not produce positive adjustment in children is in high-conflict divorces. When conflict between parents is marked, frequent contact with the noncustodial parent may do more harm than good.

**Custodial Parental Adjustment and Parenting Skills**

According to this view, divorce affects children negatively to the extent that it interferes with the custodial parents’ psychological health and ability to parent effectively. Following divorce, custodial parents often exhibit symptoms of depression and anxiety. Lowered emotional well-being, in turn, is likely to impair single parents’ child-rearing behaviors. Hetherington and colleagues found that, during the first year following separation, custodial parents were less affectionate toward their children, made fewer maturity demands, supervised them less, were more punitive, and were less consistent in dispensing discipline.

Research provides clear support for this perspective. Almost all studies show that children are better adjusted when the custodial parent is in good mental health and displays good child-rearing skills. In particular, children are better off when custodial parents are affectionate, provide adequate supervision, exercise a moderate degree of control, provide explanations for rules, avoid harsh discipline, and are consistent in dispensing punishment. Also consistent with a parental adjustment perspective are studies showing that, when custodial parents have a good deal of social support, their children have fewer difficulties.

**Interparental Conflict**

A third explanation for the effects of divorce on children focuses on the role of conflict between parents. A home marked by high levels of discord represents a problematic environment for children’s socialization and development. Witnessing overt conflict is a direct stressor for children. Furthermore, parents who argue heatedly or resort to physical violence indirectly teach children that fighting is an appropriate method for resolving differences. As such, children in high-conflict families may not have opportunities to learn alternative ways to manage disagreements, such as negotiating and reaching
Life-Span Adjustment of Children to Their Parents’ Divorce

compromises. Failure to acquire these social skills may interfere with children’s ability to form and maintain friendships. Not surprisingly, numerous studies show that children living in high-conflict two-parent families are at increased risk for a variety of problems. It seems likely, therefore, that many of the problems observed among children of divorce are actually caused by the conflict between parents that precedes and accompanies marital dissolution.

Studies show that children in high-conflict intact families are no better off—and often are worse off—than children in divorced single-parent families. Indeed, children in single-parent families may show improvements in well-being following divorce if it represents an escape from an aversive and dysfunctional family environment. Furthermore, a study by Cherlin and colleagues shows that many, but not all, of the difficulties exhibited by children of divorce, such as behavioral problems and low academic test scores, are present prior to parental separation, especially for boys. This finding is consistent with the notion that the lowered well-being of children is partly attributable to the conflict that precedes divorce. In addition, conflict may increase around the time of the separation, and parents often continue to fight long after the divorce is final. Indeed, many studies show that children’s adjustment is related to the level of conflict between parents following divorce. It should be noted here that postdivorce adjustment may also be influenced by residual effects of conflict that occurred during the marriage. (For further discussion of this topic, see the article by Johnston in this journal issue.)

**Economic Hardship**

Divorce typically results in a severe decline in standard of living for most custodial mothers and their children. Economic hardship increases the risk of psychological and behavioral problems among children and may negatively affect their nutrition and health. Economic hardship also makes it difficult for custodial mothers to provide books, educational toys, home computers, and other resources that can facilitate children’s academic attainment. Furthermore, economically pressed parents often move to neighborhoods where schools are poorly financed, crime rates are high, and services are inadequate. Living under these circumstances may facilitate the entry of adolescents into delinquent subcultures. According to this view, divorce affects children negatively to the extent that it results in economic hardship.

Studies show that children’s outcomes—especially measures of academic achievement—are related to the level of household income following divorce. For example, Guidubaldi and colleagues found that children in divorced families scored significantly lower than children in intact two-parent families on 27 out of 34 outcomes; taking income differences into account statistically reduced the number of significant differences to only 13.

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Similarly, McLanahan found that income accounted for about half of the association between living in a single-parent family and high school completion for white students. However, most studies show that, even when families are equated in terms of income, children of divorce continue to experience an increased risk of problems. This suggests that economic disadvantage, although important, is not the sole explanation for divorce effects.

**Life Stress**

Each of the factors noted above—loss of contact with the noncustodial parent, impaired child rearing by the custodial parent, conflict between parents, and a decline in standard of living—represents a stressor for children. In addition, divorce often sets into motion other events that may be stressful, such as moving, changing schools, and parental remarriage. And of course, parental remarriage brings about the possibility of additional divorces. Multiple instances of divorce expose children to repeated episodes of conflict, diminished parenting, and financial hardship.

For some children of divorce, stress accumulates throughout childhood.

Research generally supports a stress interpretation of children’s adjustment following divorce. Divorces that are ac-
compounded by a large number of other changes appear to have an especially negative impact on children.\textsuperscript{59} Furthermore, parental remarriage sometimes exacerbates problems for children of divorce,\textsuperscript{17,60} as does a second divorce.\textsuperscript{61}

A General Perspective on How Divorce Affects Children

All five explanations for the effects of divorce on children appear to have merit, and a complete accounting for the effect of divorce on children must make reference to each. Because of variability in these five factors, the consequences of divorce differ considerably from one child to the next.

Consider a divorce in which a child loses contact with the father, the custodial mother is preoccupied and inattentive, the parents fight over child support and other issues, the household descends abruptly into poverty, and the separation is accompanied by a series of other uncontrollable changes. Under these circumstances, one would expect the divorce to have a substantial negative impact on the child. In contrast, consider a divorce in which the child continues to see the noncustodial father regularly, the custodial mother continues to be supportive and exercises appropriate discipline, the parents are able to cooperate without conflict, the child’s standard of living changes little, and the transition is accompanied by no other major disruptions in the child’s life. Under these circumstances, one would predict few negative consequences of divorce. Finally, consider a high-conflict marriage that ends in divorce.

To understand how divorce affects children, it is necessary to assess how divorce changes the total configuration of resources and stressors in children’s lives.\textsuperscript{62}

What Interventions Might Benefit Children of Divorce?

Concern for the well-being of children of divorce leads to a consideration of how various policies and interventions might reduce the risk of problems for them. The most commonly discussed interventions include lowering the incidence of divorce, joint custody, child support reform, enhancing the self-sufficiency of single mothers, and therapeutic programs for children and parents. Interventions suggested in this article are considered in the light of available research evidence.

Lowering the Incidence of Divorce

In the United States during the twentieth century, divorce became increasingly available as the result of a series of judicial decisions that widened the grounds for divorce. In 1970, no-fault divorce was introduced in California; presently it is available in all 50 states.\textsuperscript{63} Under most forms of no-fault divorce, a divorce can be obtained without a restrictive waiting period if one partner wants it even if the other partner has done nothing to violate the marriage contract and wishes to keep the marriage together. This fact raises an interesting question: If the law were changed to make marital dissolution more difficult to obtain, would we see a corresponding improvement in the well-being of children?

Several considerations suggest that this outcome is unlikely. First, although legal divorces occurred less often in the past, informal separations and desertions were not uncommon, especially among minorities and those of low socioeconomic status.\textsuperscript{64} From a child’s perspective, separation is no better than divorce. If the legal system were changed to make marital dissolution more difficult to obtain, and if doing so lowered the divorce rate, would we see a corresponding improvement in the well-being of children?

Overall, to understand how divorce affects children, it is necessary to assess how divorce changes the total configuration of resources and stressors in children’s lives.\textsuperscript{62}
present just as many problems for children as do divorced single-parent families, perhaps more so. Given that the legal system cannot stop married couples from living apart or fighting, changing the legal system to decrease the frequency of divorce is unlikely to improve the well-being of children.

Is it possible to lower the frequency of divorce by increasing marital happiness and stability? The government could enact certain changes toward this end, for example, by changing the tax code to benefit married parents. It is possible that such a policy would enhance the quality and stability of some marriages; however, providing these benefits to married-couple families would increase the relative disadvantage of single parents and their children, an undesirable outcome. Alternatively, the government could take steps to promote marriage preparation, enrichment, and counseling. Increasing the availability of such services would probably help to keep some marriages from ending in divorce. However, as Furstenberg and Cherlin suggest, the rise in divorce is the result of fundamental changes in American society, including shifts in personal values and the growing economic independence of women, factors that cannot be affected easily by government policies.65 As such, any actions taken by government to strengthen marriage are likely to have only minor effects on the divorce rate.

### Increasing the Incidence of Joint Physical Custody

The history of custody determination in the United States has changed over time primarily in response to societal influences. In the eighteenth century, fathers usually were awarded custody of their children as they were considered the dominant family figure and were most likely to have the financial means to care for them. In the nineteenth century, the preference for custody moved toward women. The reason for this shift was probably occasioned, in part, by the industrial revolution and the movement of men from the home to the workplace to earn a living. Women, in this circumstance, were needed to care for the children while men were at work and became the primary caretakers of children. At this time, child developmentalists also focused on the importance of the mother-child relationship, and the assumption was that the children were usually better off under the custody of their mother. Recently, society has moved toward a dual-earner family, and child developmentalists have emphasized the importance of both parents to the child. These changes are currently reflected in the law which emphasizes the importance of maintaining relationships with both parents.66 The result has been an increased interest in joint custody, which is now available as an option in most states.59

**Joint physical custody** provides legal rights and responsibilities to both parents and is intended to grant children substantial portions of time with each parent. **Joint legal custody**, which is more common, provides legal rights and responsibilities to both parents, but the child lives with one parent.66 (See Table 1 in the article by Kelly in this journal issue.)

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**Joint physical custody is associated with greater father contact, involvement, and payment of child support.**

Joint legal custody may be beneficial to the extent that it keeps both parents involved in their children’s lives. However, studies show few differences between joint legal and mother-custody families in the extent to which fathers pay child support, visit their children, and are involved in making decisions about their children, once parental income, education, and other predivorce parental characteristics are taken into account.66,67 Although joint legal custody may have symbolic value in emphasizing the importance of both parents, it appears to make little difference in practice.

In contrast, joint physical custody is associated with greater father contact, involvement, and payment of child support.66 Fathers also appear to be more satisfied with joint physical custody than with mother custody. For example, Shrier and colleagues found in 1991 that joint-custody fathers were significantly more satisfied than sole-maternal-custody fathers in two areas, including their legal rights and responsibilities as a parent and their current alimony and child support financial arrangements.66,69 Joint physical custody may be beneficial if it gives
children frequent access to both parents. On the other hand, residential instability may be stressful for some children. Although few studies are available, some show that children in joint physical custody are better adjusted than are children with other custody arrangements, and other studies show no difference.

However, these results may present a picture that is too optimistic. Courts are most likely to grant joint physical custody to couples who request it. A large-scale study by Maccoby and Mnookin in California showed that couples with joint physical custody, compared with those who receive sole custody, are better educated and have higher incomes; further-

more, couples who request joint custody may be relatively less hostile, and fathers may be particularly committed to their children prior to divorce. These findings suggest that some of the apparent positive "effect" of joint custody is a natural result of the type of people who request it in the first place.

It is unlikely that joint physical custody would work well if it were imposed on parents against their will. Under these conditions, joint custody may lead to more contact between fathers and their children but may also maintain and exacerbate conflict between parents. Maccoby and Mnookin found that, although conflict over custody is relatively rare, joint custody is sometimes used to resolve custody disputes. In their study, joint custody was awarded in about one-third of cases in which mothers and fathers had each initially sought sole custody; furthermore, the more legal conflict between parents, the more likely joint custody was to be awarded. Three and one-half years after separation, these couples were experiencing considerably more conflict and less cooperative parenting than couples in which both had wanted joint custody initially. This finding demonstrates that an award of joint custody does not improve the relationship between hostile parents.

As noted above, studies show that children's contact with noncustodial parents is harmful if postdivorce conflict between parents is high. To the extent that joint physical custody maintains contact between children and parents in an atmosphere of conflict, it may do as much (or more) harm than good. Joint custody, therefore, would appear to be the best arrangement for children when parents are cooperative and request such an arrangement. But in cases where parents are unable to cooperate, or when one parent is violent or abusive, a more traditional custody arrangement would be preferable.

Does research suggest that children are better adjusted in mother- or father-custody households? From an economic perspective, one might expect children to be better off with fathers, given that men typically earn more money than do women. On the other hand, children may be cared for more competently by mothers than fathers, given that mothers usually have more child care experience. Studies that have compared the adjustment of children in mother- and father-custody households have yielded mixed results, with some favoring mother custody, some favoring father custody, and others favoring the placement of the child with the same-sex parent.

A recent and thorough study by Downey and Powell, based on a large national sample of children, found little evidence to support the notion that children are better off with the same-sex parent. On a few outcomes, children were better off in father-custody households. However, with household income controlled, children tended to be slightly better off with mothers. This finding suggests that the higher income of single-father households confers certain advantages on children, but if mothers earned as much as fathers, children would be better off with mothers. The overall finding of the study, however, is that the sex of the custodial parent has little to do with children's adjustment. In general then, it does not appear that either mother or father custody is inherently better for children, regardless of the sex of the child.

Child Support Reform

It is widely recognized that noncustodial fathers often fail to pay child support. In a 1987 study by the U.S. Bureau of the Census, about one-third of formerly married women with custody had no child
support award. And among those with an award, one-fourth reported receiving no payments in the previous year. In the past, it has been difficult for custodial mothers to seek compliance with awards because of the complications and expense involved. New provisions in the 1988 Family Support Act allow for states to recover child support payments through the taxation system. Starting in 1994, all new payments will be subject to automatic withholding from parents’ paychecks.

Child support payments represent only a fraction of most single mothers’ income, usually no more than one-fifth. As such, stricter enforcement of child support payments cannot be expected to have a dramatic impact on children’s standard of living. Nevertheless, it is usually highly needed income. As noted above, economic hardship has negative consequences for children’s health, academic achievement, and psychological adjustment. Consequently, any policy that reduces the economic hardship experienced by children of divorce would be helpful. Furthermore, the extra income derived from child support may decrease custodial mothers’ stress and improve parental functioning, with beneficial consequences for children. Consistent with this view, two studies show that regular payment of child support by noncustodial fathers decreases children’s behavior problems and increases academic test scores. Furthermore, in these studies, the apparently beneficial effect of child support occurred in spite of the fact that contact between fathers and children was not related to children’s well-being.

Research indicates that the majority of fathers are capable of paying the full amount of child support awarded; in fact, most are capable of paying more. Based on these considerations, it would appear to be desirable to increase the economic support provided by noncustodial fathers to their children. This would include increasing the proportion of children with awards, increasing the level of awards, and enforcing child support awards more strictly. A guaranteed minimum child support benefit, in which the government sets a minimum benefit level and assures full payment when fathers are unable to comply, would also improve the standard of living of many children.

Requiring fathers to increase their economic commitment to children may also lead them to increase visitation, if for no other reason than to make sure that their money is being spent wisely. A number of studies have shown that fathers who pay child support tend to visit their children more often and make more decisions about them than do fathers who fail to pay. If increasing the level of compliance increases father visitation, it may increase conflict between some parents. On the other hand, some children may benefit from greater father involvement. Overall, the benefits of increasing fathers’ economic contribution to children would seem to outweigh any risks. (See the articles by Garfinkel and by Roberts in this journal issue.)

**Economic Self-Sufficiency for Single Mothers**

As noted above, stricter enforcement of child support awards will help to raise the standard of living of single mothers and their children. However, even if fathers comply fully with child support awards, the economic situation of many single mothers will remain precarious. To a large extent, the economic vulnerability of single mothers reflects the larger inequality between men and women in American society. Not only do women earn less than men, but many married women sacrifice future earning potential to care for children by dropping out of the paid labor force, cut-ting back on the number of hours worked, taking jobs with more flexible hours, or taking jobs closer to home. Thus, divorcees are disadvantaged both by the lower wages paid to women and by their work histories. In the long run, single mothers and their children will achieve economic parity with single fathers only when women and men are equal in terms of earnings and time spent caring for children.

In the short term, however, certain steps can be taken to allow single mothers receiving public assistance to be economically self-sufficient. These steps would include the provision of job training and subsidized child care. Although these
programs operate at government expense, they are cost-effective to the extent that women and children become independent of further public assistance. Furthermore, many single mothers are “penalized” for working because they lose government benefits, such as health care and child care. Welfare reform that removes work disincentives by allowing women to earn a reasonable level of income without losing health care and child care benefits would be desirable. In fact, changes in these directions are being implemented as part of the Family Support Act of 1988. Given that the employment of single mothers does not appear to be harmful to children and can provide a higher standard of living for children than does welfare, and given that economic self-sufficiency would probably improve the psychological well-being of single mothers, it seems likely that these changes will benefit children.

Therapeutic Interventions for Children

According to Cherlin, there are still no firm estimates on the proportion of children who experience harmful psychological effects from parental divorce. Research suggests that, in many cases, children adjust well to divorce without the need for therapeutic intervention. However, our current understanding is that a minority of children do experience adjustment problems and are in need of therapeutic intervention. The type of therapeutic intervention suited for children varies according to the type and severity of the adjustment problems and the length of time they are expressed by the child. The major types of therapeutic interventions include child-oriented interventions and family-oriented interventions.

Child-oriented interventions attempt to help children by alleviating the problems commonly experienced by them after divorce. Some intervention programs include private individual therapy. However, many single parents are unable to afford private therapy for their children and may enroll them in programs in which counselors work with groups of children.

Typically, in these sessions, children meet on a regular basis to share their experiences, learn about problem-solving strategies, and offer mutual support. Children may also view films, draw, or participate in role-playing exercises. Small groups are desirable for children of divorce for several reasons. Not only can they reach large numbers of children, but the group itself is therapeutic: children may find it easier to talk with other children than with adults about their experiences and feelings. Most group programs are located in schools; such programs have been introduced in thousands of school districts across the United States.

Evaluations of these programs have been attempted, and in spite of some methodological limitations, most are favorable: children from divorced families who participate, compared with those who do not, exhibit fewer maladaptive attitudes and beliefs about divorce, better classroom behavior, less anxiety and depression, and improved self-concept. Although much of the evidence is positive, it is not entirely clear which components of these programs are most effective. For example, improvement may be brought about by a better understanding of divorce, newly acquired communication skills, or the support of other students. Although more evaluation research is needed, the evidence is positive enough to warrant further development and introduction of therapeutic programs for children.

In addition to child-focused interventions, there are family-focused interventions including both educational and therapeutic programs. These programs are aimed at divorcing parents, with the intention of either improving parenting skills or reducing the level of conflict over children. In principle, therapeutic interventions that improve parental child-rearing skills or decrease the level of conflict between parents should benefit children, although this effect has not yet been demonstrated.

Our current understanding is that a minority of children do experience adjustment problems and are in need of therapeutic intervention.

What Directions Should Future Research Take?

All things being equal, existing research suggests that a well-functioning nuclear
family with two caring parents may be a better environment for children’s growth and development than a divorced single-parent family. Children of divorce, as a group, are at greater risk than children from intact families, as a group, for many psychological, academic, and social problems. And adults raised in divorced single-parent families, as a group, do not achieve the same level of psychological and material well-being as those raised in continuously intact two-parent families. However, we need to keep in mind that many children are better off living in single-parent households than in two-parent families marked by conflict. Furthermore, we need to recognize that most single parents work hard to provide their children with a loving and structured family life. Many single-parent families function well, and most children raised in these settings develop into well-adjusted adults. Blaming single parents as a group for the problems experienced by children of divorce is a pointless exercise.

At this time, our knowledge about children and divorce needs to be expanded in certain directions. The long-term effect of divorce on children is the basic question that needs to be addressed. The answers to this question will inform social policy and the court system, shape models of intervention, and influence parental decision making. This type of information should be obtained from longitudinal and longitudinal-sequential designs. Needed are studies that begin prior to divorce, as well as studies that follow children of divorce through adolescence and into adulthood.87 Also needed are data on how a variety of factors—relations with parents, parental adjustment, economic well-being, conflict, and exposure to stressors—combine to affect children’s response to divorce. This research should make it possible to determine which children lose the most through divorce, which children are relatively unaffected, and which children benefit.

Information on how divorce affects children in different racial and ethnic groups is another area of research that would be informative from the standpoint of both clinical and economic intervention.33 And more evaluation of various interventions, both legal (joint custody, mediation, child support reform) and therapeutic, are also needed.

It is important to focus on establishing policies that will help narrow the gap in well-being between children of divorce and children from intact families.88 High divorce rates and single-parent families are facts of life in American society. If it is impossible to prevent children from experiencing parental divorce, steps must be taken to ease the transition.

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6. The cross-sectional and longitudinal designs are used widely in adjustment research and other developmental research because they are suited for studies in which there are one or more nonmanipulable independent variables. In this instance, the researcher must select subjects who already possess different levels of a particular characteristic. Examples of nonmanipulable independent variables include age, sex, marital status of parents, and socioeconomic status. The use of nonmanipulable independent variables in a study usually
9. There are major advantages and disadvantages to this type of design. The advantages include the following: a researcher can observe actual changes occurring in subjects over time; irrelevant sources of variability are not of concern; there are no cohort effects because the same cohort is being studied over time and there is no selection bias. Disadvantages that may influence reliability and validity include the following: an expensive and time-consuming design; subject attrition; selective dropout; possible obsolescence of tests and instruments; a potentially biased sample; measurement of only a single cohort; effects of repeated testing; reactivity; difficulty of establishing equivalent measures; and the inevitable confounding of the age of subjects and the historical time of testing. As with the

8. For example, a researcher using a cross-sectional design might study four different groups of children, grouped by age (for example, 3, 6, 9, and 12) and parental marital status (married or divorced) to see if children from divorced families exhibit significantly more aggression than children from intact families. If the researcher finds that aggressive behavior is, indeed, significantly more likely in children from divorced families, the researcher cannot determine the direction of the relationship, that is, whether the divorce increased aggression in these children or high levels of aggression in the children caused the divorce. In addition, the researcher is unable to determine if some extraneous variable caused both high aggression and divorce, for example, low socioeconomic status.

7. The optimal comparison group would be families that would potentially divorce, but stay together for the sake of the children. However, this population of families would be very difficult to sample. Another available comparison group would be continuously intact two-parent families. However, this comparison group is not consistently used by researchers. Many classifications in cross-sectional research are based on the current marital status of parents. The intact group is heterogeneous as to marital history, and the divorced group is not similar as to the time of divorce or the age of the children when it took place. Some of the most prominent longitudinal studies have no comparison group of intact families. See, for example, Wallerstein, J.S., and Corbin, S.B. Father-child relationships after divorce: Child support and educational opportunity. Family Law Quarterly (1986) 20:109-28; Maccoby, E.E., and Mnookin, R.H. Dividing the child: Social and legal dilemmas of custody. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992.

6. For the developmental researcher, there are advantages and disadvantages to using this type of research design. The cross-sectional design is relatively inexpensive and timely, which makes it a popular choice for many researchers. However, a number of difficulties may threaten the validity and reliability of the results. These difficulties include the following: there is no direct measure of age changes; the issue of individual stability over time cannot be addressed; there is a possibility of selection bias; there may be difficulty establishing measurement equivalence; and there is an inevitable confounding of age and time of birth. Some of these problems are avoidable with adequate planning and control; however, the problem of the confounding of age and time of birth (cohort) is intrinsic in the cross-sectional design, and it is impossible to avoid.

Another design that is available to researchers but is seldom used is called the cross-sectional-sequential design. A cross-sectional-sequential study tests separate cross-sectional samples at two or more times of measurement. In comparison to a standard cross-sectional design, this sequential design has the advantage of at least partly unconfounding age and year of birth (because there are at least two different cohorts for each age tested), and it also provides a comparison of the same age group at different times of testing (called a time-lag comparison). It would be advantageous to use this research design in the future for some types of adjustment research.

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A design that is available to developmental researchers and is more complicated but should assist in disentangling the contributions of age, generation, and time of measurement is called the longitudinal-sequential design. In this design, the samples are selected from different cohorts (that is, years of birth), and they are tested repeatedly across the same time span. This design offers at least three advantages over a standard longitudinal design. The longitudinal comparisons are not limited to a single generation or cohort because samples are drawn from different birth years. In addition, there is a cross-sectional component to the design because different age groups are tested at each time of measurement. Finally, the same age group is represented at different times of measurement. More information is provided than in a standard longitudinal design, and there is greater opportunity to disentangle causative factors. See Baltes, P.B., Reese, H.W., and Nesselroade, J.R. Life-span developmental psychology: Introduction to research methods. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1977.


12. It should be noted that there are no perfect random samples on this subject. The national studies select ever-divorced families, who are limited by geography, the choice of schools included (rarely private schools, which is a problem in places where a large segment of children, often those with the best advantages, are not enrolled in public schools), or use the court sampling frame, which offers insufficient address data to draw a comprehensive sample.

13. This type of random selection of samples should not be confused with random assignment of subjects to groups.

14. For a discussion of matching, see note no. 6, Miller.


19. The term meta-analysis refers to the quantitative combinations of data from independent studies. The procedure is valuable when the result is a descriptive summary of the weight of the available evidence. Summaries are necessary primarily because there are conflicting results in the literature and, at some point, it is valuable to know where the weight of
the evidence falls. The primary goals of meta-analysis include determining whether significant effects exist for the topic being reviewed, estimating the magnitude of effects, and relating the existence and magnitude of effects of variations in design and procedure across studies. Proponents of meta-analysis argue that meta-analysis can achieve a greater precision and generalizability of findings than single studies. They then have the potential to provide more definitive evidence for policymaking than can be realized by other means. However, there are logical and methodological difficulties with the technique that need to be understood when interpreting the results of any meta-analysis. First, there is the problem of the selection of studies, that is, how to determine which studies should be included in the meta-analysis. Oakes contends that any rule establishment in this area presents impossible difficulties. A second problem is that, if a researcher includes only published studies in the meta-analysis, there is the danger of overestimating differences between groups. This danger arises because journal articles are not a representative sample of work addressed in any particular research area. Significant research findings are more likely to be published than nonsignificant research findings. To control for this problem, the researcher must trace unpublished research and incorporate it into the analysis. A third problem is that the use of meta-analysis may overinflate differences between groups because a high proportion of reported statistically significant results are spurious. Finally, because of the diversity of the types of samples that are included in the meta-analysis, it is difficult—if not impossible—to know what population the results are applicable to. For more in-depth discussions of the technique, its advantages, and its disadvantages, see note no. 18, Glass, McGaw, and Smith; Oakes, M. The logic and role of meta-analysis in clinical research. *Statistical Methods in Medical Research* (1993) 2:146-60; note no. 6, Miller; Thompson, S.G., and Pocock, S.J. Can meta-analyses be trusted? *The Lancet* (November 2, 1991) 338:1127-30; Wolf, F.M. *Meta-analysis: Quantitative methods for research synthesis.* Series: Quantitative Applications in Social Sciences, No. 07-059. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1986.

20. Amato, P.R., and Keith, B. Parental divorce and the well-being of children: A meta analysis. *Psychological Bulletin* (1991) 100:26-46. Studies were included if they met the following criteria: (1) were published in an academic journal or book, (2) included a sample of children of divorce as well as a sample of children from continuously intact two-parent families, (3) involved quantitative measures of any of the outcomes listed below in note no. 21, and (4) provided sufficient information to calculate an effect size.

21. In the meta-analysis for children, measures of well-being were coded into the following eight categories: academic achievement (standardized achievement tests, grades, teachers' ratings, or intelligence); conduct (misbehavior, aggression, or delinquency); psychological adjustment (depression, anxiety, or happiness); self-concept (self-esteem, perceived competence, or internal locus of control); social adjustment (popularity, loneliness, or cooperativeness); mother-child and father-child relations (affection, help, or quality of interaction), and other.

22. Mean effect sizes ranged from .06 for the “other” category (not significant) to -.23 for conduct (p < .001), with an overall effect size of -.17 across all outcomes. Effect sizes reflect the difference between groups in standard deviation units. A negative effect size indicates that children of divorce exhibit lower well-being than do children in intact two-parent families. With the exception of the “other” category, all mean effect sizes were statistically significant (p < .001).


24. In the meta-analysis for adults, outcomes were coded into the following 15 categories: psychological well-being (emotional adjustment, depression, anxiety, life-satisfaction); behavior/conduct (criminal behavior, drug use, alcoholism, suicide, teenage pregnancy, teenage marriage); use of mental health services; self-concept (self-esteem, self-efficacy, sense of power, internal locus of control); social well-being (number of friends, social participation, social support, contact with parents and extended family); marital quality (marital satisfaction, marital disagreements, marital instability); separation or divorce; one-parent family status; quality of relations with one’s children; quality of general family relations (overall rating of family life); educational attainment (high school graduation; years of education); occupational quality (occupational prestige, job autonomy, job satisfaction); material quality of life (income, assets held, housing quality, welfare dependency, perceived economic strain); physical health (chronic problems, disability), and other.

25. Mean effect sizes ranged from -.02 for relations with children (not significant) to -.36 for becoming a single parent (p < .001), with an effect size of -.20 across all outcomes. All mean


31. See note no. 7, Wallerstein and Corbin.


34. See note no. 10, Wallerstein and Kelly.

35. See note no. 10, Wallerstein and Blakeslee.

36. For a summary of these studies, see Amato, P.R. Children’s adjustment to divorce: Theories, hypotheses, and empirical support. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* (1993) 55:23-38.

37. See note no. 20, Amato and Keith.


39. This trend was confirmed in the meta-analysis by Amato and Keith; see note no. 23. For examples of studies, see Amato P.R. Parental absence during childhood and depression in later life. *Sociological Quarterly* (1991) 32:543-56; Gregory, I. Introspective data following childhood loss of a parent. *Archives of General Psychiatry* (1965) 13:99-109; Saucier, J., and Ambert, A. Parental marital status and adolescents’ optimism about their future. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* (1982) 11:345-53. Our meta-analysis also showed that, although children who experience parental death are worse off than those in intact two-parent families, they have higher levels of well-being than do children of divorce.


46. Of course, it is also likely that well-behaved children allow parents to behave in a positive and competent manner, whereas ill-behaved children stimulate problematic parental behaviors. Undoubtedly, children influence parents just as parents influence children. However, this does not invalidate the notion that divorce-induced stress can interfere with a person's ability to function effectively as a parent and that a parent's failure to function effectively might have negative consequences for children.


51. It is also probable that children's problems, to a certain extent, exacerbate conflict between parents.


56. See note no. 15, Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, and McLaughlin.


60. See note no. 16, Baydar. Hetherington and her colleagues found that the remarriage of the custodial mother was associated with increased problems for girls but decreased problems for boys. Hetherington, E.M., Cox, M., and Cox, R. Long-term effects of divorce and remarriage on the adjustment of children. *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry* (1985) 24:518-30.


65. See note no. 1, Furstenberg and Cherlin.

66. See note no. 7, Maccoby and Mnookin.


78. See note no. 52, Duncan and Hoffman.


